



2022 Urban Fire Forum Position Statement

Support for the National Firefighter Registry

Introduction

Firefighting is a hazardous occupation. In addition to the potential for injuries, heat stress, shift work, sleep disruption, and psychological stress, firefighters are exposed to toxic combustion byproducts.⁽¹⁾ Several studies show that firefighters have an increased risk of cancer.⁽²⁻⁵⁾ In the summer of 2022, International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) completed their evaluation of the carcinogenicity of occupational exposure as a firefighter, which they have now classified as a group 1 known human carcinogen, based on sufficient evidence for cancer in humans for mesothelioma and bladder cancer. There was limited evidence for several other cancers: colon, prostate, testicular, melanoma of the skin, and non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

Still, more in-depth and comprehensive research is needed to better understand specific cancer risks and occupational risk factors among all types of firefighters. Previous studies, for example, did not examine the cancer risk among volunteer firefighters, female and minority firefighters, and subspecialty groups of the fire service, such as instructors, arson investigators, airport rescue firefighters, and wildland firefighters. Moreover, most previous cancer studies involved firefighters who were employed decades ago when the toxins to which they were exposed and the protective equipment they used may have differed significantly from today.

Initiatives

To better understand the link between on-the-job exposure to toxicants and cancer, the U.S. Congress directed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to create the National Firefighter Registry (NFR). The NFR will be used to monitor and better understand cancer among firefighters in the U.S. It is the hope that this data will allow us to build tools, protocols and trainings to reduce the exposure and risk of cancer.

The NFR is now being developed. It will be a voluntary registry of all U.S. firefighters, not just those with cancer. The project is being led by the CDC National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), which has the knowledge, expertise, experience, and resources to lead this type of project.

With broad participation, the NFR will be able to:

- Track cancer incidence (including rare types of cancer) among the full range of firefighters throughout the U.S.
- Explore possible different cancer risks among specific groups of firefighters, including women, minorities, and sub-specialties of the fire service.
- Investigate whether the cancer risk is improving or worsening among more recent firefighters.
- Evaluate how exposures, including large or unusual incidents, relate to firefighters' cancer risk.

- Evaluate how control interventions relate to firefighters' cancer risk.

Recommendations

Participation in the NFR is voluntary; however, it is the official position of the Urban Fire Forum that all firefighters—structural and wildland, career and volunteer, active and retired, and those with and without cancer—should participate. Broad and diverse participation is critical to the success of the NFR. Only with widespread involvement will researchers be able to generalize from the collected data to make accurate conclusions.

By supporting the NFR, the Metropolitan Fire Chiefs hope to help learn more about the health risks firefighters face with respect to cancer. Information gleaned from this project will be invaluable to fire departments, fire service organizations, standard-setting organizations, and policymakers throughout the country as they strive to protect the health and safety of firefighters.

The Metropolitan Fire Chiefs Association encourages all fire chiefs to take the following steps in anticipation of the NFR opening registration by the end of 2022.

- Advise your fire department that NIOSH and the Metropolitan Fire Chiefs Association encourages ALL firefighters to participate, not just those with cancer. This includes retired firefighters.
- Communicate with your fire department that registration is expected to begin in late 2020.
- Encourage firefighters within your fire department or organization to register when the NFR opens. Registration includes the initial sign-up and completing a questionnaire. The entire registration process should take less than 30 minutes. More information on the registration process will be coming and will be communicated widely to the fire service and posted on the NIOSH website.
- Make it clear that all information in the NFR about individual firefighters is confidential and will never be released.
- Recommend that firefighters agree to participate in follow-up questionnaires over time. These follow-up questionnaires will be important for understanding risk factors and answering other important research questions.
- Prepare your fire department to share incident and employment records with NIOSH as requested. Incident and employment records will help bolster the quality of data, specifically when looking at dose-response relationships.
- Tell others, including retired and volunteer firefighters, about the NFR. Word-of-mouth communication will be vital for increasing participation in the NFR.
- Reach out to NIOSH if you have any questions or concerns. NIOSH has a dedicated NFR email address (NFRRegistry@cdc.gov) and is currently keeping track of supportive fire departments.

- Use all your available communications channels to create an on-going flow of information about the NFR.

Protecting the health and safety of our firefighters is one of a fire chief's most important responsibilities. The NFR promises to play a critical role in providing the essential information needed to address the serious hazard of job-related cancer facing our responders.

Sources

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